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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA
NSC FOR SHAPIRO/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [AL](#) [IS](#) [SU](#) [IR](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: ASAD AT AL SUMMIT: ASSERTING RIGHT OF ARAB RESISTANCE, SUPPORTING ARAB UNITY

REF: STATE 28323

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (S) Summary: Syria's Bashar Asad heads this week to the Arab League Summit in Doha seeking to support Qatar's efforts for a productive meeting and to assure moderate Arab states of Iran's desire for better relations. Syria's position on Sudan remains aligned with that of Qatar in support of Arab League and African Union efforts to broker a deal among Sudanese political factions. Syria opposes the International Criminal Court's (ICC) indictment of President Bashir and is for now less concerned with the current humanitarian crisis sparked by Khartoum's decision to expel humanitarian workers.

The Syrian Government, most recently in a long interview with Asad by Lebanese daily as-Safir, continues to tout its strong desire for Palestinian reconciliation. Syrian officials argue, however, that demanding Hamas compliance with Quartet principles as a pre-condition to forming a unity government will prevent the parties from reaching a compromise. They also suggest the international community should avoid the approach it adopted in 2006 toward the NUG, while arguing the new Israeli government should be required to endorse the same Quartet principles. On the Arab Peace Initiative, a Syrian MFA contact suggests Arab leaders are likely to agree on keeping the initiative on the table, but they will link its "activation" to acceptance of the API by the incoming Israeli government. End Summary.

¶2. (S) Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad's Chef Husam Ala'a convoked Charge March 25 to discuss a follow-up issue related to Acting NEA A/S Feltman's and NSC NENA Senior Director Shapiro's March 7 meeting with Syrian FM Muallim (septel). Charge took the opportunity to deliver reftel points. Ala'a, who did not have a ready answer to Charge's question regarding proper procedures for the U.S. Embassy to deliver demarches, agreed to respond "indirectly." (Comment: This was the first Embassy demarche to the Syrian MFA in recent memory.) Ala'a said he planned to travel with the Syrian delegation to Doha later in the week.

Sudan, ICC, and Humanitarian Workers

¶3. (S) In response to reftel's points regarding Sudanese President Bashir's objectionable decision to expel NGO humanitarian workers, Ala'a replied that the Arab League viewed the ICC's course as counterproductive. First, there was the indictment of a sitting president, which established a negative precedent. Moreover, the ICC's indictment of Bashir had scuttled Qatari-hosted talks between the Sudanese government and the Justice and Equity party that were

organized under Arab League and African Union auspices. Ala'a commented further that U.S. policy advocated selective application of the ICC's jurisdiction, in some cases arguing against it, and in others, favoring it. This practice suggested the existence of a double standard, for instance, in which the U.S. criticized international reports on alleged Israeli crimes against humanity in Gaza, while it favored the ICC's indictment of Bashir for alleged crimes against humanity in Darfur. Charge argued that the important point for Arab Leaders was not to embrace Bashir at the Summit. The USG's most immediate concern was Bashir's expulsion of NGOs from Sudan, a move that threatened to exacerbate an already grave humanitarian situation.

Arab Peace Initiative

¶4. (S) Ala'a reported there would probably be continued discussion of the Arab Peace Initiative in Doha, but it looked likely that the API would "remain on the table." He added that the Arab Leaders still needed to reach agreement on what Israeli actions would be necessary to "activate" the initiative, explaining that Syria favored a proposal to require the incoming Israeli government to announce its acceptance of the API. The Syrian government was waiting to see the composition of the Israeli government as well as its platform on how it will approach peace issues.

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Palestinian Reconciliation

¶5. (S) Charge reported that FM Muallim had told Acting A/S Feltman that Syria was working to moderate Hamas's position and wanted Hamas to join the PLO. As Acting A/S Feltman had stated March 7, the U.S. wanted any reconciliation process to result in an endorsement of core Quartet principles. Ala'a replied Syria had encouraged Hamas to act constructively and attached a high importance to Palestinian reconciliation. Syria's position, however, emphasized the need for the international community to avoid dealing with any new Palestinian government in the way that it did with the short-lived 2006 unity government. Hamas's integration into the PLO was one element of the reconciliation process, but the terms of this process were still under discussion. In light of the likelihood of a conservative Israeli government, Syria urged the international community to apply the Quartet principles not only to the Palestinians, but also to the Israelis. Not only was there a question, he said, of the new GOI's acceptance of previous agreements, there was also some doubt that parties in the new coalition would accept the two-state solution.

¶6. (S) Ala'a argued that the days of Hamas suicide bus bombings aimed at scuttling peace efforts had passed. Syria supported the right of armed Palestinian resistance so long as "current circumstances continue." The West should expect a strong Arab reaction against a conservative Israeli government and "extreme" Israeli positions. If, on the other hand, Israel moved in the direction of peace, it would be easier to convince Hamas and other Palestinian groups to exercise restraint. Charge replied the U.S. administration had placed a high priority on achieving a two state solution and comprehensive peace. Ala'a acknowledged this position, but reiterated that moderating Hamas's position would be increasingly difficult if Israel adopted more extreme policies.

Comment

¶7. (S) As the outgoing titular President of the Arab League, Bashar is set to arrive in Doha this week in a considerably stronger position than he was in 12 months ago. His government has taken the first step toward re-engaging Washington after having solidified ties with key EU countries, all without granting significant concessions or modifying Syria's positions. Bashar's talks in Riyadh with Saudi King Abdullah and Egyptian President Mubarak in Riyadh appeared to have established sufficient common ground to prevent a replay of the deep Arab divisions over Lebanon that nearly scuttled last year's AL summit hosted by Damascus. The naming of a Syrian ambassador to Lebanon, three months after Bashar promised the French it would be done, represents a positive gesture toward Saudi Arabia and others in the name of Arab unity. Syrian contacts suggest Damascus timed this gesture to improve the Qatar's prospects for hosting a successful summit.

¶8. (S) Meanwhile, Bashar's strong relations with Iran and his support of Hamas during and after the Gaza crisis reaffirm Syria's credentials as a key member of the "opposition" camp, as the Arab world braces for a new conservative government in Israel. At the same time, Syria's engagement in indirect peace talks with Israel between May and September 2008 gave it enough credibility as a possible partner for regional peace to keep open the option of talks with Israel. After eight years in power, Bashar has solidified his position internally, inside the Arab world, and internationally. He must feel some sense of quiet satisfaction that, absent a premature demise, he may well outlast the aging leaders in Saudi Arabia and Egypt who have actively opposed him.

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